

When HRD has a bad reputation

The government's decision to change the name of the ministry has nothing to do with HR's current bad reputation but it is time for HR to rebuild its reputation

By Jeffrey Pfeffer & M Muneer

The President of India has recently endorsed the name change of the Human Resources Ministry to Ministry of Education. For years, the HR department has been the favorite spot for every employee to throw criticism at. Is the government decision the final endorsement of its bad reputation?

Rewind to more than two decades: Tom Stewart, the Fortune editor then, suggested that instead of improving HR, the department should be abolished, eliminated, or nuked. Interestingly, the public opinion hasn't changed all that much since.

The complaints detailed in numerous articles often focus on bureaucracy and inefficiency; on processes that do not add real value, such as those dreaded performance appraisals; and HRD's burdening of line managers with rules and paperwork that hinder leaders' ability to do their jobs effectively.

But in the summer of 2019, a more fundamen-

tally serious – but solvable – complaint surfaced in The Atlantic. The charge: that HR was failing at one of its core missions: To reduce the incidence of sexual harassment in the workplace. HRD saw its role as “protecting the company” and was doing so by limiting legal liability and making complaints – and complainants – disappear. Recall also how an allegation of sexual harassment against an SC judge was disposed of in 2019?

Rethinking HR's primary function

HR needs a broader and more assertive perspective on its fundamental role to ensure the development and maintenance of workplaces that serve to effectively attract, retain, and motivate employees. Such workplaces would obviously need to be free of bullying, and abuse of any kind, including harassment based on sex, religion, caste, or whatever. They would also need to be, to the extent possible, free from stress and conducive



to increasing employee well-being.

To accomplish this, HR needs to be willing, regardless of the political climate inside the organization, to address the fundamental causes of corporate misbehavior and punish the wrongdoers. By doing so, HR will reduce the toll – financial, legal, emotional, or moral – exacted by these actions. More importantly, by taking the lead in creating a healthy culture, HR will have fixed the root causes of bullying and harassment that have persisted for far too long.

The problem is that nothing has changed. A 2007 book by Bob Sutton, *The No Asshole Rule* detailed the enormous cost – to people, from stress and ill health, and to companies, from turnover and reduced productivity – that occurred in abusive workplaces where bosses belittled, harassed and screamed at subordinates. In 2017, Sutton published a follow-up, *The Asshole Survival Guide*, because, sadly, very little had changed in 10 years, despite all published details of negative outcomes.

Meanwhile, in spite of decades of training, sexual

harassment remains a pervasive workplace issue globally. However, very few cases get reported due to stigma and fear. Between 2014-2017 there has been a 54% rise in legally registered sexual harassment cases in India. Other findings: 70 percent of harassment victims never talk to a supervisor about it, and about 90 percent never file a formal complaint. And for good reason: Sexual harassment reporting is often followed by organizational indifference, as well as hostility and reprisals against the victim.

Where is HR in all of this? It is alleged that HR is actually quite successful at dealing with sexual harassment – by creating templates of compliance designed to defend companies against lawsuits!

Because HR is often seen as taking the company's side, few people trust it to represent their interests. Taking the company's side may preserve an HR manager's job for the time being, but it will not contribute to creating workplaces that ultimately breed success.

By covering up serious issues, punishing the people who complained, and supporting senior management, HR isn't actually serving the companies' interests at all.

Is HR really a bad word?

It is time for HR to rebuild

its reputation. The #MeToo movement is not going to disappear. And many younger workers are less tolerant of bad bosses and workplace stress than their seniors. Bad behavior tolerated in a workplace is likely to lead to more bad behavior. People learn by observing what others do and the consequences of that behavior. Simply put, workplaces are not going to get better on their own.

Second, we know the toll – in physical and mental

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health, turnover, and productivity – that toxic workplaces exact. Gender and caste discrimination, through their creation of stress, affect the health of people exposed to it.

Third, we know that the laws against harassment and bullying will only be strengthened to enforce employees' rights to a workplace free of intimidation.

Therefore, the best thing HR can do to help their employers is not to continue to help those employers dodge liability. The most productive, economically

beneficial thing that HR can do is to push for the \ sanctioning of people who harass others. Set hiring and promotion standards that do not excuse bad behavior by pointing to other contributions. Measure the extent of bullying and other forms of abuse through anonymous surveys, and bring those measures to the attention of top management.

And yes, be willing to leave organizations that are unwilling to take the steps required to create work-

places free of abuse. When HR begins to more forcefully advocate for healthier, less toxic workplaces, organizations will experience increased levels of engagement and greater retention of talent. It will also be good for HR to no longer be seen as an enabler of work environments that are an anachronism currently. 

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